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Experiences with the Discovery Seminar Program

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When I think about my college experience thus far, and reflect on the decisions that have led me to where I am today, I consider one of the best to be my involvement in the Discovery Seminar program here at the University of Kentucky. I remember attending my orientation in the summer of 2003, trying to seek out a schedule to fulfill both my interests and requirements as a first year student. My advisor asked me to consider a Discovery Seminar course, something that she assured me would be a small classroom setting compared to the larger classes that I would be taking in the fall. As I searched through the booklet she handed me, I came across one called, “Can Money Buy Happiness? Poverty in Appalachian Kentucky.” This seminar particularly interested me, because I have been a Kentucky resident all my life, and during high school I completed several community service projects. One project included a trip to Eastern Kentucky to help impoverished families in the surrounding areas. I quickly enrolled in the class and hoped it would be as good an experience as the staff at my orientation promised me.

I walked into the classroom the first day and was greeted by a group of about twenty other students, a female teacher, and a male undergraduate instructional assistant. I felt secure in the small classroom atmosphere and content to have discussions with such a diverse group of people who all had their own views on the topic of poverty. My teacher made it easy for us to feel comfortable in the classroom and made it known that everything discussed in the seminar would remain confidential. She had such a vast knowledge of the poverty situation in the surrounding Kentucky counties, we felt we could ask her any question we had and her answers would be greatly informative and beneficial to our understanding of the different subjects.

I felt that I could really learn a great deal in the classroom, because of the additional help that was easy to access in a small setting of twenty students. Besides the unique curriculum and course load of the Discover Seminar classes, I believe that another aspect that makes these courses so strong is the opportunity for students to become close to the others in their class.

Our group of students met an additional day each week for UK 101, a course that discussed the University of Kentucky, Lexington, and other pertinent issues that face first-year students. Because we met three times a week, and often talked a great deal, our class became very close to one another. It was great to find others in the same position as I was as first-year students who were going through similar transitions during the first semester of school. I quickly began to look forward to our classes and made some of the best friends I have today in college.

Many Discovery Seminar courses have a required field trip that pertains to the course area being studied. Because our focus was poverty in Kentucky, we made a visit to a nearby place to assist impoverished families. We made our trip to Owsley County, in two vans, driving down old country roads in beautiful fall weather. We spent an entire Friday afternoon helping with miscellaneous projects around a house that to our eyes was underprivileged beyond belief. Even though I had participated in service assignments like this before, I myself remember being stunned by the chaotic appearance of the home and being amazed at how different it looked when we had finished.

The people who lived in the home were so grateful that we had come to help them and everyone in the community seemed to know that we were there. We ended our day at the church of the small town cooking a meal with the two nuns who resided there and who were close friends of our teacher. The field trip was a great extension to our classroom and truly gave our class an opportunity to bond additionally in a different setting. We wrapped up our semester that year with a final lunch party and I was genuinely sad to leave the class. I truly feel that my decision to take a Discovery Seminar that first semester was
the best I could have made for myself. It helped me to learn how to be a good student in college and also opened my eyes to issues of poverty that I had never taken notice of before.

I am fortunate enough to say that my experience with the Discovery Seminar program did not end that fall semester, as most of my former classmates’ did. I was contacted in May of 2004 by the Program Director with the opportunity to become an undergraduate instructional assistant for her class the following semester. I accepted the position, with mixed emotions as to what to expect in the fall. I was overwhelmed and nervous to be a sophomore doing something that I regularly thought an older student would do. When I was younger, I was never someone who enjoyed speaking in public and I rarely took leadership positions unless I was pushed into them. I approached the upcoming semester with anxiety and was introduced to a new side of myself that I never knew I was capable of expressing.

The group of students who were in our class were wonderful, intelligent, and unique all in their own distinctive ways. I loved being viewed in their eyes as someone who was older and could help them with the different situations that arise within the first year of being in college. Being the assistant gave me a whole different perspective on the class and helped me to gain insight into how a teacher must feel when I was asked to prepare certain UK 101 classes and take over responsibilities inside the classroom. I organized events outside the classroom for my students, with efforts to get them to bond like my class had freshman year. Through dinners, plays, and other activities they grew close to one another and, by the time of our field trip, they were more than happy to devote a Friday to a class field trip.

We visited Owsley County once again and this time separated into different teams, taking over diverse projects around the town and helping many people along the way. This time we also spent the night in the church and spent the next morning at Robinson Forest in Eastern Kentucky. Our field trip went really well, and the students had a great time getting to know one another. The responsibility of being an undergraduate instructional assistant was something that truly helped shape me into the person I am today. After the course, I was comfortable in a setting that caused me to have responsibility for others, give presentations to the class, and also to organize activities for them. This experience led me to assume additional leadership positions in my sorority and also in retreats organized for high school students.

After such a great experience, my first year as an undergraduate instructional assistant I applied to the program again my junior year. I took a position working for a different instructor in a Discovery Seminar class that focused on the Vietnam War. This was also a very positive learning atmosphere for me, because I love history and learning new things about the past that I did not know before. Mr. Berres was a genuine and intelligent teacher who loved to invite our class over for home cooked meals at his house. We took a one-day field trip to Frankfort, to see the Vietnam Memorial, which was something that many of the students, myself included, did not even know was there. I loved being an assistant for a class that had historical importance and I feel that it strengthened my character to gain knowledge of a time that was controversial in our culture.

As I now begin my senior year at the University of Kentucky, I am involved with the Discovery Seminar program for a fourth and final time. I am the assistant for a class entitled, “Regulating Sex and Gender,” which is going to include both the historical and social aspects of sex and reproduction. I am deeply saddened that this will be my final experience with this wonderful program, but very excited for a fresh beginning and new learning situations for myself and my students. My involvement with this remarkable program has led me to have a great respect for teachers — a feeling of respect that goes beyond the classroom and has enabled me to see the inner workings of a course and all the preparations involved. I also have admiration for the faculty who work within these programs, those who are determined to have unique classes and genuinely care about the knowledge the students receive in their first semesters of college. I also am pleased to see how much I have grown as a person and student and, for that reason, I am grateful to the Discovery Seminar program at the University of Kentucky for giving me such a wonderful opportunity to shine these past four years.